

Machiavelli

Descrizione Della Peste

di Firenze Dall'Anno 1527



THE ENGLISH TRANSLATION OF THE *PISTOLA*

An Epistle Written Concerning the Plague to Girolamo di Maestro Luca at His Villa

To my most beloved and highly honoured friend: although your sweet companionship has always kept me truly happy, and I have always taken singular pleasure, not only from your honest and courteous manners, but also from your pleasant and exceptionally humane reasoning: I am not happy, however, when I am deprived of it for some time, as it often happens that you are absent, or involved in graver activities. I have felt sorrow in part somewhat similar to that which I feel at present, due to the length of time that you remain far away from your city. I attribute this present sadness to two principle causes. The first I believe is, that since you are always increasing your benevolence towards me, with the continual multiplication of your infinite favors, it follows yet again that my affection towards you increases; although having been indebted to you for many years in various ways, I did not think that it was possible that my affection for you might possibly grow even more. The second reason is, that if it is true that the multitude of earthly things, and their diversity distract the human mind, then I will confess that the variety of conversations with my many friends, which at present I miss, was not allowing me to absorb (or immerse) myself as intensely in the recollection and consideration of you, truest friend, and of your most gentlemanly customs, of which, since at present I am deprived, I notice that I lack completely

84r 3 “compare” or “friend” • though “compare” implies an even deeper level of familiarity, friendship, and companionship than “amico” or “friend” in English. Francesco Vettori frequently referred to Machiavelli as his “compare.” See Niccolò Machiavelli, *Opere di Niccolò Machiavelli: Volume Terzo: Lettere*, ed. Franco Gaeta (Turin: Unione Tipografico Editrice Torinese 1984), Letter 205, dated 15 March 1513, where Vettori refers to Machiavelli as “Compare mio caro.” “Compare” can also be used as a sign of respect, and was sometimes used by clients when they addressed patrons, or students when they addressed teachers, which is probably the case here. Strozzi dedicated the *Pistola* to his childhood teacher, Girolamo di Maestro Luca. See chap. 3 for more background on Maestro Luca.

84r 13–14 “quantunque … potesse” or “although … more” • is a very difficult passage to translate. In the original, one finds “sono” in this sentence, but it is nearly impossible to make sense of Strozzi’s phrase when “sono” is included. I chose to render the gerund as “having” and intentionally overlooked “sono.”

that pleasure, when on other occasions I merely used to listen to you to be satiated somewhat. And I am not only of such a friend, and of all of my other dear companions deprived, but also of the men known to me, so that, corresponding with them, I was able to greet them. Truly if our civic dress, although one seldom sees it, no longer existed, I would sometimes think myself to have wandered into some other city. Therefore, since Heaven does not permit us, my only and beloved friend, by the deadly pestilence, to nourish our ears with more of those sweet discussions, and our eyes with those gracious subjects, which once used to lighten every tedious care, let us not deprive ourselves of visiting one another with letters; no little comfort in all of these human miseries. Therefore I am stirred (knowing how much one who is away from the fatherland is grateful to receive even the smallest piece of news) to write about all that I have seen in our distinguished city, with my wet and unfortunate eyes; and even though the matter will bring you little pleasure, hearing that you are out of so perilous a place should make you grateful. Furthermore, while it proves to you that I (of whose death perhaps you have heard) might yet live, it also will oblige you to make less grave every melancholy or other painful nuisance.

84r 30 “patria” or “fatherland” • for one of Machiavelli’s most detailed definitions of *patria*, assuming that he wrote the work, see the opening lines of his *Discourse or Dialogue Concerning our Language*, 130–31 for English translation and 167–8 for Italian original in my *Politics, Patriotism and Language: Niccolò Machiavelli’s “Secular Patria” and the Creation of an Italian National Identity* (New York: Peter Lang, 2005). It is quite likely that Machiavelli’s concept of *patria* influenced Strozzi’s use of the term in the *Pistola*. In this instance, I rendered *patria* as “fatherland”; below, I rendered it as “native city.”

I hardly dare to place my timid hand to the page to trace so troublesome a beginning; so that the more I mull over such miseries in the midst of the mind, the more I do recoil from the horrendous description of them: and although I have seen it all, to recount it renews painful tears; nor do I know where I ought to make a start; and if it were permitted me, from this weak undertaking, I would withdraw myself. But, the overwhelming desire that I have, to know if you are still alive, will overcome every fear.

One finds that our miserable Florence, at the present, resembles a city that has been sacked by the infidels and afterwards abandoned. Some of the inhabitants, such as yourself, have retired to country villas to escape the deadly plague; some are dead and others are approaching death; so that the while present circumstances offend us, the future threatens us; so as one struggles with death, one fears for one's life. Oh injurious age! Oh lamentable season! The neat and beautiful streets, which used to be bursting with rich and noble citizens, are now stinking, ugly and swarming with the poor. One passes by their impudent and fearful shrieks with difficulty and trepidation. The shops are locked, the businesses closed, the courts and the lawyers dragged away, prostrating the laws. Now one hears of this theft, now of that murder: the piazzas and markets, where the citizens used to be in the habit of gathering frequently, are now made into communal graves, and vile dens of thieves. Men go about alone, and in exchange for friends,

84v 10 “ville” or “villas” • for a nearly identical passage concerning attempts by Florentine aristocracy to escape the plague, see Giovanni Boccaccio, *The Decameron*, trans. Guido Waldman, ed. Jonathan Usher (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 8 (hereafter *Decameron* [1998]). For Italian original see Giovanni Boccaccio, *Decameron*, in *Tutte le opere di Giovanni Boccaccio*, vol. 4, ed. Vittore Branca (Milan: Mondadori, 1976), 12, secs. 19–20 (hereafter *Decameron* [1976]).

84v 8–20 “Non … receiptacoli” or “One finds … den of thieves” • very closely mirrors Boccaccio’s description of Florence during the first plague outbreak of 1347–48. See *Decameron* (1998), 9 for English translation and *Decameron* (1976) 13, secs. 23–4 for Italian original.

one meets people infected with this deadly plague. Even if one parent finds the other, or a brother finds his brother, or a wife her husband, each one keeps a safe distance from their relations: and what is worse? Fathers and mothers spurn their own children, abandoning them. One holds blossoms, another odoriferous herbs, a third sponges, a fourth glass vials, and one carries in his hand (or it is far better to say, always held to his nose) small balls composed of diverse aromatic spices; and these are the precautions against the plague. I am certain that few shops, where bread is distributed, are still open; but there, the shop-goers infect each other and take home buboes.

The conversations which used to be honorable in the piazzas and profitable in the markets change to miserable and sorrowful themes: for example, one says: “such a one is dead, that other is sick, another fled, another is confined at home, such a one is in hospital, another is on the lookout, and yet another has disappeared”; and similar recent tidings, which by imagination alone would suffice to make none other than Aesculapius sick. Many go searching for the causes of the disease, and some say: “The astrologers threaten us with it”; others, “The prophets have predicted it.” One recalls some marvel; one blames the quality of the weather, and the heavy air which swarms with plague, saying that it was the same in 1348 and 1478; and still more say similar things. There is such unanimous agreement that everyone concludes, that not only this, but infinite other sicknesses have laid us to ruin. These are the pleasant topics which are heard continually. And though I might be able to place our miserable native city before your mind’s eye with only a single word, by saying that you might imagine it altogether different and completely unlike that which

84v 21–4 “L’uno … gl’abbandonono” or “Even if one parent … abandoning them” • once again, mirrors the *Decameron* almost exactly. See *Decameron* (1998), 10 for English translation, and *Decameron* (1976), 13–14, secs. 24–25 for Italian original.

84v 24–6 “Chi fiori … i prouedimenti” or “One holds blossoms … against the plague” • is lifted almost directly from the *Decameron*. See *Decameron* (1998), 9 for English translation and *Decameron* (1976), 13–14, sec. 24–5 for Italian original.

84v 26 “canoue” or “shops” • is a Florentine/Tuscan term.

84v 27 “ghauoccioli” or “buboes” • are swellings in the lymphatic system, which usually presented in the groin, armpits, and neck. This symptom of bubonic plague was famously described by Boccaccio in the *Decameron*. For English translation, see *Decameron* (1998), 7; for Italian version, see *Decameron* (1976), 10–11, secs. 10–12.

85r 5 “Eschulapio” or “Aesculapius” • is mentioned in the *Decameron* (1998), 14 and *Decameron* (1976), 19, sec. 48 for Italian original.

85r 9 “mille trecento quarant’otto” or “1348” • is highlighted in the *Decameron* (1998), 6 and *Decameron* (1976), 9–10, sec. 8.

you used to see (as nothing demonstrates for you better than such a comparison) I, nevertheless, want you to be able to understand the matter in greater depth, because the thing imagined compared with the truth of that which one imagines never adds up. Nor am I able, it seems to me, to illustrate this with a finer example than my own life: therefore I will describe my life to you, so that by it you might measure all the rest.

You know then that on work days, I leave my house before that hour in which all the terrestrial vapors are evaporated by the sun, to go about my usual business; having first taken some antidotes against the venomous infirmity, in which (although the distinguished doctor Mingo said that they are breastplates of paper), I certainly have faith, and not a little; I am not many steps away from home, when every other remaining thought that gathers in my mind, although grave and of things important and necessary, clears from my head, because the first things that present themselves to my eyes, by my good luck, are gravediggers. Not those gravediggers of the infected, but the usual type: who, at one time by the few, but now by the many, dead are grieved, because it seems to them that such an abundance begets their future famine. Whoever would have believed that the time would come, in which they might have wished for the good health of all of the ill, as they swear truly to yearn? I think easily, because if those dying of the plague died in another time and of another disease, they would make their usual profit. And so passing by San Miniato between the towers, where I was at one time nearly deafened by the din of the wool beaters, and the whistles and rough conversations of the wool traders, I found an all-pervasive and unwanted silence. Continuing on my journey, in the vicinity

85r 17–18 “la cosa … non aggiugne” or “the thing … never adds up” • resonates with Machiavelli’s *Il Principe*, chap. 15. “But since my intention is to say something that will prove of practical use to the inquirer, I have thought it proper to represent things as they are in truth, rather than as they are imagined” (Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. George Bull [London: Penguin, 1995], 48). The Italian original is “Ma, sendo l’intendo mio scrivere cosa utile a chi la intende, mi è parso più conveniente andare dritto alla verità effettuale della cosa, che alla immaginazione di essa” (Machiavelli, ‘Il Principe,’ in *Opere*, vol. 1, ed. Corrado Vivanti [Rome: Einaudi, 1997], 159).

85r 22 “partendomi io di casa” or “I am not … from home” • it seems very likely that Strozzi began his “tour” of Florence at the family palace, the Palazzo Strozzi, where he had lived since 1503. See chapter 1 for more detail.

85r 25 “Mingho” • a reference to Mingo/Mengo Bianchelli/o also known as Mingo/Mengo da Faenza. For more on Bianchelli, see appendix 3.

of the Mercato Nuovo, I encountered the horseman of the pestilence: by whom being deceived for the first time I remained there; because, seeing from afar white horses (although they weren't of snow-whiteness) bearing a litter, which I thought to myself might contain some noble woman or person of ancient lineage, who rode about for his amusement. But seeing around them then, instead of servants, nurses from Santa Maria Nuova, there was no need to inquire further concerning the person's heritage or occupation. This not being enough for me, and in order to give you all the more extended news of the morning of the joyous beginning of May, I entered the admirable and venerable Church of Santa Reparata; where there were only three priests: the one was singing Mass; the second serves as the choir and organ; the third hears confessions in a chair surrounded by the wall, in the middle of the first nave. Nevertheless, he wore irons on his ankles, and handcuffs on his wrists: because he was ordered to be thus by the Vicar, so that he might be able better to escape temptations in canonical solitude. The pious attendants of the Mass included three women in ragged cloaks – old bent and perhaps lame women; each separately in her own pew

85v 1 “Samminiato” or “San Miniato” • is an ancient church (the facade dates from c. 1090) located in the Oltr’Arno, outside of the city’s walls, on a hill overlooking the entirety of Florence (Peter Murray, *The Architecture of the Italian Renaissance* [New York: Schocken, 1986]: 16, 17). If Strozzi began his walk through Florence at the Palazzo Strozzi, his *casa*, then he must have crossed the Arno on his way to San Miniato, but he did not mention how, or by which bridge, he crossed to the Oltr’Arno.

85v 2 “camati” or “wool beaters” • is probably a Florentine dialectical form derived from “scamati,” the sticks used to beat and prepare raw wool.

85v 4 “Mercato Nuovo” • is known today for its famous Loggia (c. 1547) and its bronze boar, both of which have become synonymous with the Mercato Nuovo (La Loggia del Porcellino). Neither of these were present when Strozzi wrote the *Pistola*, c. 1522. Once again, Strozzi fails to mention where he crossed the Arno on his journey from San Miniato to the Mercato Nuovo.

85v 9 “Santa Maria Nuova” • For more detail on the history of the Hospital of Santa Maria Nuova, see K. Park and J. Henderson, “The First Hospital among Christians’: The Ospedale di Santa Maria Nuova in Early Sixteenth-Century Florence,” *Medical History* 35 (1991): 164–88.

85v 12 “Santa Reparata” • here Strozzi refers to the Duomo, Santa Maria del Fiore, using the name of the cathedral that predated it. Visitors to the Duomo may still see the foundations of Santa Reparata, which are partially intact under the Duomo, by descending a set of steps found on the right-hand side of the nave as one faces the high altar of the cathedral. The present facade of the Duomo was added in the nineteenth century. During Strozzi’s life, the facade of the Duomo resembled the red brick façade of San Lorenzo, which is a short walk from the Duomo. For more on the Duomo, see Murray, *Architecture*, 24, 26, 27, 28, 31, 32, 36, 38, 41, 47, 55, 100, 137.

kneeling; among them only one, my grandfather's nurse, seemed to recognize me. There were three similarly devoted old men, who, without ever seeing one another, shuffled about the choir on crutches, at times giving the eye to the three lovelies. Truly, one could not believe such things if one had not seen them in person. Therefore I, in the manner of one who witnessed that spectacle (seeing it hardly makes one to believe it) remained stupefied. Doubting that the people would not, as they usually did, swarm behind the equestrians into the piazza (as is usual on so celebrated a morning); with such hope I partook there. Where, bustling about I saw, in exchange for men and horses, crosses, coffins, stretchers and tables, on which those diverse dead persons were carried by grave diggers. They (the grave diggers) were summoned by Barlacchi out of necessity, as supporters of the lofty Signori, who made their ceremonial entrance at that moment. And I believe, per adventure, that if the number of the living was not sufficient, he would have read out the names of some of the dead, calling them out according to the custom; even though nothing like the resurrection of Lazarus would happen.

As this spectacle seemed neither worthy nor very safe to me, I did not stay long; and as I was not able to believe that any other part of the city was, with greater frequency, filled with nobles, I directed by steps toward the most famous piazza of Santa Croce. There, I saw a tremendous number gravediggers dancing in a circle and singing loudly, "Hearty welcome, plague; hearty welcome, plague." This was their merry "Hearty welcome, May." Their appearance, together with the thunder of their song, and its words, offered as much

85v 24–5 “armeggiatori” or “equestrians” • For more detail, see Richard Trexler, *Public Life in Renaissance Florence* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press), 306–12. In that passage, Trexler discussed one role of the “armeggiatori.” They were horsemen and banner bearers. It seems that Strozzi is referring to “equestrians” who usually led the feast day procession and the accompanying crowd into the piazza • the “piazza” referenced here was almost certainly the Piazza della Signoria, where Strozzi would have walked by the Palazzo Vecchio.

86r 3 “Barlachi” or Barlacchi • a reference to Domenico Barlacchi or Barlacchia. He was “herald of the Florentine Signoria.” See Judith Bryce “The Theatrical Activities of Palla di Lorenzo Strozzi in Lyon in the 1540’s,” in *The Theater of the English and Italian Renaissance*, ed. J.R. Mulryne and Margaret Shewring (New York: St. Martin’s, 1991), 55–69. See 61–2, 67n29 for more details. Also see the famous study by F. Pintor, “Ego Barlacchia recensui,” in G.S.L. 1, vol. 39 (1902), 103. “Barlacchia” was a pseudonym sometimes adopted by Machiavelli himself.

86r 9–10 “piazza di Santa Croce” “piazza of Santa Croce” • was and remains a grand public space, surrounded by wonderful examples of Florentine Renaissance mercantile and domestic architecture. The jewel of the piazza is the Church of Santa Croce, which during Strozzi’s time, like the Duomo, lacked a marble façade.

86r 11 “becchini” or “gravediggers” • for more detail on these characters see *Decameron* (1998), 15–16, and *Decameron* (1976) 21, secs. 57–9.

displeasure to my eyes and ears, as formerly the happy songs of the honorable young maidens used to bring me pleasure; so that without hesitating, I escaped into the church, where I offered my usual devotions, without a single witness, when I heard from a long way off, a worried and fearful voice. To which drawing myself, I saw laying on the ground, near the fresh graves in the cloister, in black raiment, a pale and afflicted maiden, whose face appeared more that of a corpse than a living woman. (She had) bitter tears streaming down her beautiful cheeks, (and she was) tearing out strands of her beautiful tousled hair, (and) beating her breast and then her face with her own hands. Seeing such a thing would move a block of marble to pity her. Thus, I was stricken with pain, though exceedingly frightened of her. Nevertheless, I cautiously approached her and asked: "Oh why do you lament so grievously?" She immediately covered her face with the hem of her dress, so I would not be able to recognize her. This act, as is natural, increased my desire to know her. However, the fear, of the other song which those spotted with the plague contagion sang, slowed my steps; but, I told her, that she should not be frightened of me, because I was, finding her oppressed by such severe anxieties, here to give her council and help. Calming her, I added, that I would not leave until I could see her face. She turned, hesitating somewhat, then presently, like a spirited and courageous woman, took to uncovering herself saying: "Am I so foolish, that I was not anxious in the presence of the multitude, but will now be terrified of only a single man, who certainly seeks to attend to my needs?" She was so transfigured by her garb and by her immeasurable passion, that I recognized her more by her voice than by her form. When I asked her the cause of such affliction; she exclaimed "Woe unto me! I do not know how to

86r 15 "in chiesa mi fuggi" or "I escaped into the church" • the church (or basilica) in question is the Santa Croce. For more on the history of this famous Franciscan edifice, see Murray, *Architecture*, 24, 26, 27, 28, 39, 42, 44, 237. It is interesting to note that the church's marble facade, like the Duomo's, was not added until the nineteenth century.

86r 18 "chiistro" or "cloister" • could be a reference to the "Primo Chiostro," where the visitor will also find the Pazzi Chapel, designed by Filippo Brunelleschi, or the "Secondo Chiostro," also designed by Brunelleschi.

hide it. I grieve and afterwards it grieves me more that I have lost all my contentment, which, even though I might live for 1,000 years, I am not going to recover. And that which pains me even more is that I am still unable to die. I do not complain about this pestilential season, but rather about my unhappy fortune – that the indissoluble lovers' knot, which so much of my artistry and diligence fabricated, cannot remain tied; from this our common ruin was born and from thence my loving tears are now poured upon the grave of my ill-fated, faithful lover. Oh with whom I had delighted so many times in these once joyful and now miserable arms! With what delight I gazed into his beautiful and shining eyes! Oh what pleasure when I pressed my longing lips to his fragrant mouth! Oh with such great contentment I united and squeezed my burning breasts to his warm and pure and youthful chest! Oh wretched me! So frequently and with such bliss we came to that final amorous joy, simultaneously slaking our desires!" She had no sooner said these words, than she immediately collapsed upon the ground in such a way, that all of my hair stood on end, fearing that she might be dead.

Because, her eyes had closed, her lips had gone pale, and her face even paler than it was before and only semi-conscious: only the movement of her grief-stricken breast showed a little life left in her. Where I, with that carnal affection that requires it, lightly began to caress her body; unlacing her (dress) in front, although she was not very tightly laced; now laying her on one side, and now turning her (to the other); and so I used on her all those remedies that the lost spirits are made accustomed to resent. Finally, as I did so, she opened her troubled eyes again, and she exhaled so warm a sigh, that if I had been made of wax, I would have melted. Then comforting her, I said: "Oh simple and unfortunate woman, will you continue to stay here? If your parents, your neighbors, or acquaintances, found you here all alone, what might they have said? Where are your prudence and your respectability?" "Oh my misery!" she said, "I never had the former and the latter, I have lost together with that sweet look of his beautiful eyes; a gaze which nourished me as the water which nourishes fishes." To that I responded: "if my councils, Lady, are of some worth to you then you appreciate that I want you, not for love of me, for I am unworthy of it, to come with me; for the sake of your honor, which, will soon be entirely restored; even though it is somewhat obscured at present, more by the malignity of other people's wicked tongues, than fault of your own. Because, I know many women who fled from their husbands, sheltering with others

than their parents. How many have been uncovered in much graver errors by their neighbors and relatives, who today are held to be the beautiful and the good? Sin certainly is a human thing: but enough good sometimes comes of it to amend one's ways. So that, if you will behave properly, you will see that immediately (immediately I say to you) it will be said that you have been unjustly slandered." In this manner persuading her, I led her to her own house.

The sun had already climbed to the top of the sky, so that the shadows appeared smaller, when I found myself alone, as I always was. So, I sat a while, desiring to take my food. I rested a little and set out once again to wander the city, directing my steps toward the new temple of the Holy Spirit (Santo Spirito); where there was no sign of preparation for the divine service evident, even though it was the proper time. The friars in the church (I stayed there although they were few) were furiously pacing to the high altar and back. They declared to me that a good many of them were dead; and that yet more were sure to die, because they were not allowed to leave, and did not have any provisions to keep them alive. And I need not tell you how they light up the candles of the church with their profanities, I believe perhaps so their dead would not have to find their way out in the dark. Thus, I was driven away, more by the fear of Heaven than plague, the friars were repeating the same benedictions so frequently. And turning into the Via Maggio, since it was the Calends of May, however I did not see anything that looked like

87r 24 "di nuouo ... ricondussj" or "I rested a little ... to wander the city" • the next portion of Strozzi's walk took him back across the Arno to the Santo Spirito quarter.

87r 25 "nuouo tempio dello Spirito Santo" or "the new temple of The Holy Spirit" • a reference to the basilica that was designed by Filippo Brunelleschi. The basilica, located in the Oltr'Arno, was not completed until decades after Brunelleschi's death in 1482.

87r 33 "uia Maggio" or "Via Maggio" • Here Strozzi is making an obvious wordplay, taking the "Via Maggio" because it was the first of May (*maggio*). It is likely that the "Via Maggio" received its name following Dante's use of *maggio* as "Broadway" or the "Broadest Way". These interesting ideas, as they pertain to the Tuscan dialect and place/street names in Florence, were developed by Rudolph Altrocchi in "Trinità or Trinità?" *Italica* 26, no. 1 (1949): 57–61. For particular references to the "Via Maggio," see 60–1. Strozzi made his way from the Oltr'Arno by the "Via Maggio" and the "Santa Trinita" bridge, to the city centre and the Church of Santa Trinità. The "Via Maggio" and the "Ponte Santa Trinità" were constructed as a part of an urban renewal campaign by the Florentine comune in the late thirteenth century. See Roger J. Crum and John T. Paoletti, eds., *Renaissance Florence*:

Social History (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 198.

87r 34 "maggio le calendi" or "Calends of May" • see chapter 2, note 5 of this study for coverage of Machiavelli's *Minuta*, c. 1522, which references this exact period.

May to me; in fact, I found a dead man in the middle of the bridge, who no one dared approach: and entering the ancient church of Santa Trinità I found only one seemingly well-born man there. I asked him for what reason he remained in a city faced with such danger and he answered me: "For love of my native city, which every one of her little-loving citizens has shunned." To whom I said, "he errs much less who seeks to preserve himself for his native city so that he might be able to serve it at a later time than those who, feigning to serve it, exposed themselves to the danger of leaving it forever." To which he replied: "if I must tell the truth to one who knows it already, it is not our native city that keeps me here, but it is that disconsolate lady who you saw so devotedly genuflecting - for whose love I am prepared to lay down my life." It seemed to me that such burning passion was not befitting of one of his mature age so therefore I said to him, "that even in the luckiest of houses that the father abandons his son and the wife her husband." And he responded: "Such is the degree of my love, that it surpasses every type of blood relation." He carried on like this: if to avoid the plague to be happy is an excellent remedy, then to be in the presence of her love was tremendous joy, and away from her love such grief that it alone would cause him to depart this life bitterly and alone as he was found here; so unique, he argued, was his love among the various types of love; and he concluded by saying that being in love, and wishing to live, that I should remain close to my lover. Not being so yet, but moved by his example, he urged me to fall in love to escape the deadly plague; and told me that I still had time. I was not persuaded by those arguments, judging love a much more dangerous and longer lasting pestilence. Without saying anything else to him I left. And on the nowadays deserted Spini bench

87v 2 "chiesa di Santa Trinità" or "the church of Santa Trinità" • is a fine and beautiful church, which is famous primarily because it was probably designed by Nicola Pisano. For more background, see Murray, *Architecture*, 24. The frescos of the Sassetti Chapel, located in Santa Trinità, are very helpful, however, when attempting to visualize Florence's urban landscape, and especially the locations of Santa Trinità and the Ponte Santa Trinità. This fresco by Domenico Ghirlandaio is discussed below.

87v 5 "poco amoreuoli cittadini" or "little loving citizens" • Machiavelli used this "cittadini amorevoli" on only two occasions: in his *Minuta*, c. 1522, and in his *Istorie fiorentine*. I suggested in chapter 2 that Strozzi's vocabulary here might have influenced Machiavelli's, as the *Minuta* and the *Istorie* were written at roughly the same time as the *Pistola*. See appendix 4, *Minuta*, 26.24–5. I used the vocabulary and word usage search functions at "Intratext.com" to gather this information.

I came upon the venerable father Alessio, who perhaps to flee the plague remained away from the monastery: perchance he was waiting there to confess one of his penitents outside the church; I learned from him that in the perfectly proportioned and venerable church of Santa Maria Novella, from where he, for his good behavior, was excluded, more ladies than one could wish for were assembled there (perhaps owing to the amorous instruction of the festive and charitable brothers) than in any other church. Although against his wishes, I took him with me, because the good friar feared what would certainly have happened to him if he had gone there without me. Nevertheless, staying only briefly, in fact scarcely having saluted the high altar, because he was never known for his piety, he left; so, I believe, that he could return to work at his bench. I remained to hear the friars' delightful Compline. There, even though I did not, as usual, see the great number of gentlewomen or noblemen admiring the ladies' angelic faces and the divine allure of their rich and well designed dresses, which together with the sweet music, invite souls to play

87v 23–4 “pancone degli Spini” or “Spini Bench” • is referenced by Machiavelli in his *Mandragola*. See act 4, scene 2, where he wrote of the “Pancone delli Spini,” in Pasquale Stoppelli, *La Mandragola: Storia e filologia, con l’edizione critica del testo secondo il Laurentziano Redi 129* (Rome: Bulzoni, 2005), 223. The Spini Bench no longer exists. In fact, the palace to which it was once attached is now the Salvatore Ferragamo factory and store. Formerly the Palazzo Spini, then the Spini Feroni, and now the Palazzo Spini Ferragamo, it has been radically transformed from its late medieval, early Renaissance beginnings. In order to see the “pancone degli Spini” as it probably looked when Strozzi knew it, enter the church of Santa Trinità, proceed to the high altar, and look to the back right-hand corner of the church. There, in the Sassetti Chapel, are Domenico Ghirlandaio’s frescos from the life of St Francis. The central fresco, on the back wall of the chapel, depicting St Francis resurrecting a young boy, clearly shows the piazza outside the church, the Palazzo Spini, the Ponte Santa Trinità, and the “pancone degli Spini.” This bench also hosted the famous quarrel between Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo Buonarrotti. For more on this episode, see Ridolfo Mazzucconi, *Leonardo da Vinci* (Florence: Vallecchi, 1943), 308.

87v 24 “frate Alexo” or “Father Alessio” • was a Dominican friar associated with Santa Maria Novella. This same “Father Alessio” plays a small part in saving the life of Benvenuto Cellini. See Cellini’s *The Autobiography of Benvenuto Cellini*, trans. J. Addington Symonds (New York: P.F. Collier and Son, 1910), 33. For Italian original see Benvenuto Cellini, *Vita di Benvenuto Cellini Scritta da Lui Medesimo* (Florence: Adriano Salani, Editore Viale Militare, 1903), 27–8.

87v 27 “Santa Maria Novella” • one of Florence’s most important churches, associated with the Dominican Order, where Santa Croce was associated with the Franciscan Order. The architect of the church is unknown, though tradition ascribed authorship to two unnamed Dominican friars. The church’s façade was designed by Leon Battista Alberti in 1458. See Murray, *Architecture*, 56–8 for further detail.

love games so much more than to heavenly meditations. I found there less solitude than in any other place; as a result I knew how this church might be able to call itself the most favored and highly blessed than any other. Therefore I decided to stay there until the very last. Where remained, although it was already evening, perhaps, like me, to hear the Compline, only one beautiful young woman in widow's clothes; whose beauty, and I know that I delude myself, I scarcely have the power to describe to you in words. However, to satisfy you at least in part, I will not proceed in silence; but, by imagining us there, you will supply that which my narration lacks.

At first she was (although now sitting on the marble steps near to the *cappella maggiore*) reposing on her left side in the manner of an anxious person, supporting her somewhat pale face with a snow-white arm. She was of an agreeable size and proportionate stature for a finely formed woman. So that even from here one could conclude that all the parts of such a body were so well shaped, that if stripped of her mourning raiment, they would present a wondrous beauty to my eyes. But leaving this part free for you to gaze upon in your imagination, I will describe the part that is made manifest. Her smooth and tender skin resembles spotless ivory yet so soft and delicate as to preserve the traces of even the lightest touch, no less than the fine grass of a green and dewy meadow preserves the prints made by dainty little animals. Her eyes, concerning which it might be better to say nothing at all than say only a little, seem to be two shining stars which, from time to time, she lifted with such grace, that one saw paradise opened. Her delightful brow, the length of which ends in for her splendid and beautiful eyes; about which it appears that Love jests and always flits about, shooting his arrows and wounding this, or that loving

88r 15–89r 2 “pure, per sodisfare … risentirebbe” or “However, to satisfy … might have been aroused by them” • closely resembles Machiavelli’s description of the “servant of Circe” who restores Machiavell’s flaccid “virtù” in his *L’Asino*. All English references to Machiavelli’s *L’Asino* are from “The Golden Ass,” in *The Chief Works and Others*, vol. 3, trans., Alan Gilbert (Durham: Duke University Press, 1965), 750–72 (hereafter *The Ass*); all references to the Italian original are from “L’Asino,” in *Opere*, vol. 3, ed. Corrado Vivanti (Rome: Einaudi, 2005), 51–78 (hereafter *L’Asino*).

88r 18–19 “cappella maggiore” • commissioned by Giovanni Tornabuoni, and executed by Domenico Ghirlandaio and his workshop. See P. Simons, ‘Patronage in the Tornaquinci Chapel, Santa Maria Novella, Florence,’ in *Patronage, Art and Society in Renaissance Italy*, ed. F.W. Kent and P. Simons (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987), 221–51 (cited by Paola Tinagli, *Women in Renaissance Art: Gender, Representation, Identity* [Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997], 81n12).

88v 3–4 “Gl’occhi … Stelle parieno” or “Her eyes … shining stars” • “Each eye appeared a little flame, so shining, so clear and so / lively that all vision however acute was lost in it” (*The Ass*, 759, ll. 58–9). And “Ciascuno occhio pareva una fiammella, / Tanto lucente, si spegne in quella” (*L’Asino*, 62, ll. 58–9).

perfect measure, so bright and shining, that simple Narcissus, admiring himself in it, as in the limpid pool might have become infatuated with himself; below which the finely traced arches of her black eyebrows made a covering heart. Her ears, from what of them one is able to see, were small, round, and of such shape, that every expert physiognomist would have judged them a sign of acute prudence (or intelligence). But what can I say of the sweet and delicate mouth, situated between two cheeks adorned with delicate roses and lilies or of how, I know not, even in such sadness it seems that a celestial smile shines? But I know enough to believe that Nature will use this most beautiful one as a model when it desires to enrich the world once again. The rose colored lips upon the ivory and snow white teeth appear as fiery rubies mixed together with oriental pearls. From Juno, she has a delicately formed nose, as from Venus that of her playful and flowery cheeks.

I will not leave out the beauty of her slender, white and graceful neck, which certainly should be ornamented with precious gems. Her envious clothes did not give me leave to gaze on the creamy, beautiful and finely sculpted chest, adorned with two little fresh and sweet smelling apples,

88v 8 “l’arcate” or “brow” • “Narrow arched and black were her brows, because at the shaping / of them were all the gods, all the high and heavenly councils” (*The Ass*, 760, ll. 64–6). And “Sottili, arcati e neri erano I cigli / Perch’ a plasmargli fur tutti gli Dei, / Tutti I celesti e superni consigli” (*L’Asino*, 63, ll. 64–6).

88v 14 “delichata boccha” or “delicate mouth” • “I do not know at all who made her mouth if Jove did not do it / with his own hand; I do not believe any other hand could have / made it” (*The Ass*, 760, ll. 70–2). And “Io non so già chi quella bocca fesse; / Se Giove con sua man non la fece egli, / Non credo ch’altra man far la potesse” (*L’Asino*, 63, ll. 70–2).

88v 14 “ligustri” or “lillies” • perhaps “ligustrum volgare,” a flowering shrub native to many parts of the world, including the Mediterranean.

88v 18 “denti” or “teeth” • “Her teeth were more beautiful than ivory, and her tongue moved / like a serpent between them and her lips” (*The Ass*, 760, ll. 73–5). And “I denti più che d’avorio eran begli; / E una lingua vibrar si vedeva, / Come una serpe, infra le labbra e quegli” (*L’Asino*, 63, ll. 73–5).

88v 19 “naso” or “nose” • “Of that which slopes down from these [her brow] I should like to say / something that would partly correspond to the truth, but I am / silent about it because I could not describe it” (*The Ass*, 760, ll. 67–9). And “Di quel che da quei pende dir vorrei / Cosa ch’al vero alquanto rispondesse, / Ma tacciol, perchè dir non lo sparei” (*L’Asino*, 63, ll. 67–9).

88v 21 “gola” or “neck” • “Her neck and chin were also visible, and other beauties / enough to make happy every gloomy and unsuccessful lover” (*The Ass*, 760, ll. 79–81). And “Il collo e ’l mento ancor vedeasi, e tante / Altre bellezze, che farina felice/ Ogni meschino e infelice amante” (*L’Asino*, 63, ll. 79–81).

88v 23 “ben raccolto petto” or “finely sculpted chest” • “I continued to pass my eyes over all her various parts as low as / her breast, at the splendour of which I [am still] kindled, / but seeing farther was refused me by a rich and shining coverlet / with which that little bed was covered” (*The Ass*, 759, ll. 88–93). And “Io venni ben con l’occhio discorrendo / Tutte le parti sue infino al petto, / A lo splendour del quale ancor m’accendo; / Ma più oltre veder mi fu disdetto / Da una ricca e candida coperta, / Con la qual coperto era il cicciol letto” (*L’Asino*, 63, ll. 88–93)

which I believe were grown in the famous orchard of the Hesperides. But, by the manner in which they refused to yield to her dress, they demonstrated their beauty and firmness; and between them flashes a way, at the end of which, the wanderer might reach the ultimate bliss. Her snow-white and delicate hand, although it might deprive me of part of the beauty of her elegant visage, provided its own refreshment. It was long, slender, capable and outlined with the smallest and shining veins, with the fingers straight and soft and perhaps of such virtue, that by their touches even old Priam might have been aroused by them.

I, not seeing anyone, out of respect for whom I ought to restrain myself, and she inspiring courage in me with her compassionate eyes, approached her and said: “Gracious Lady, if a courteous question is not noisome to you, might it please you to tell me for what reason you stay here for so long? And may I offer some aid to you?” To which she responded: “Like you perhaps, I have waited for the brothers’ Compline in vain. My needs are such that even a lesser man than you could be useful to me. My clothes display that I am deprived of my beloved husband, and my pain is all the more for he died of the cruel plague, and thus I remain in peril. And, if therefore, you do not want to expose yourself to harm, remain at some distance.” Her words, her voice, her manner, and the care that she seemed to have for my safety, pierced my heart so, that I would walk through fire for her. Nevertheless, fearing more to displease her, than the danger of the

88v 24–25 “horto famoso, delle Hesperi” or “famous orchard of the Hesperides”

- the trees of this mythic orchard, tended by nymphs (the Hesperides) produced golden apples, said to offer immortality to those who ate of their flesh. Strozzi’s age (roughly forty years old in 1522), the widow’s apparent youth, and the beauty of her breasts (though covered by her mourning weeds), imply that Strozzi believed he would have been reinvigorated by the love and sex offered by this young woman.

89r 1 “uerit” or “virtue” • loss of “virtù” and “impotence” and vice versa are intertwined throughout Machiavelli’s *L’Asino*. For an astutely written assessment of this topic see Michael Harvey’s ‘Lost in the Wilderness: Love and Longing in *L’Asino*,’ in *The Comedy and Tragedy of Machiavelli: Essays on the Literary Works*, ed. Vickie B. Sullivan (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000):120–37. Interestingly, here in the *Pistola* it is the woman’s “virtue” that restores the man’s.

89r 8–9 “minor persona” or “lesser man” • might also be rendered as a “younger man.”

89r 14 “nel foco entrato” or “walk through fire” • on 7 April 1498, Savonarola begrudgingly allowed a representative from his own Dominican Order, Fra Domenico, and a Franciscan opponent, Fra Francesco di Puglia, to stage a “fire” walk: both priests were supposed to pass through a large fire to find out which order had God’s blessing and support. In the end, Fra Francesco backed out of the challenge. As Strozzi was in Florence’s great Dominican church, one wonders if he was referencing that event, though in a perverse manner. See Lauro Martines, *Fire in the City: Savonarola and the Struggle for the Soul of Renaissance Florence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 219–30 for an account of this episode.

plague, I stopped short of her and asked: “Why do you stay here so alone?” [She replied] “Because I alone am spared [must] I have to have a husband in order to please you? I wish for nothing more than to live married honestly.” [I replied] “And I, who before this moment never wished to marry a woman, now see your beautiful and gracious form, upon whom Nature bestowed its bounty, and moved to compassion by your afflictions, am resolved to marry you. Even though our age difference is not ideal, my means and other circumstances are such that I will perhaps be able to please you.” She replied “With you men, ever were the promises great and the faith but small, if I have a good memory of things past.” I responded to her: “One who knows how to choose prudently does not have to put his faith in the truthfulness of others and therefore never has to repent of what he has done.” And she rejoined: “As Heaven, giver of all that is good, has brought you to me, I cannot doubt that you will show special care for me even though I have never seen you before; and consequently since you are pleased with me, it would be exceedingly wrong if I were not content with you.” It was just after she spoke those words, that a lazy friar, head held high – an act suitable for rowing rather than sacrificing; whose name I will keep to myself so as to be able better to speak of him without any hesitation – as a falcon that sees its prey from the air swoops to earth, pounced on this elegant and delicate Lady; and, as if he had spoken with her a thousand times, with great familiarity as is these friars’ custom, he asked if she lacked anything or if she needed his assistance. I told him, that she was never in need of his support, as she would never have a place for his brotherly love.

The scoundrel, acting as one already possessed, perhaps to fashion another relationship more to his taste, would fain have disturbed ours. Although he had such sparkling eyes, if he were undressed, he might have wriggled like an enchanted serpent, but when he saw that he was harshly dismissed by her, and not heartily greeted by me, he wrapped himself in his clothes again, jabbering about I know not what, and went off to some other misfortune. You must not believe that I left her there alone straight away, but rather, just behind her, I accompanied her to her house, in which, together with my heart, she locked herself. From whence I departed alone, so happy and intensely delighted by my sweet wife. So as not to deviate from the planned order of things, hastening my steps, I went to the distinguished and cheerful temple of San Lorenzo, where I hoped to see those who delighted with me in the flower of my youthful years. But it was a new emotion that overpowered me, and, as those who taste of the river Lethe, I forgot every other woman, however lovely. All of my thoughts remained wrapped in those black mourning clothes, which I constantly seemed to see about that importune and hypocritical friar; such tremendous jealousy overtook my spirits that I was not able to think on or see anything else. Therefore, to waste time here seemed vain, and as full of desire as I was, to see my longed-for wife again, at once I returned to my house; and putting an ending to this tragic consideration of the horrendous plague, I prepare myself for the pleasure of a future comedy for the following evening.

Well, that is what, my dearest friend, the first day of May offered to my eyes. Of that which will follow, you will learn about after the wedding; because before that I am not able to think of anything else.

End

89v 15 “tempio di Santo Lorenzo” or “temple of San Lorenzo” • is a basilica commissioned by Giovanni di Bicci de’ Medici c. 1419 (St Lawrence was the patron saint of the Medici family). Giovanni provided the funding to tear down the ancient Romanesque church that stood where San Lorenzo does now, and he hired Filippo Brunelleschi to design the new building. Donatello and Michelangelo, along with other, lesser architects, had a hand in the building’s final iteration. The monastic complex of which the basilica is the largest part also houses the Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, designed by Michelangelo and begun around 1525, and the Medici Chapel. Manuscript B of the *Pistola* is held in the Laurentian Library’s collections.

89v 23 “a casa mi tornai” or “I returned to my house” • over the course of a single momentous though fictitious day, Lorenzo di Filippo Strozzi visited nearly all of Florence’s major churches, he crossed the Arno four times, and he returned home ready to marry a beautiful widow. None of this is probable. In particular, the *Pistola* was most likely written in 1522; Strozzi was married then, and remained married until his wife died in 1527. Thereafter he remained a widower, and one who was serious about his faith and the preservation of his family.